TEYLIN: Teaching English to Young Learners in Indonesia
Vol. 1 No. 1 June 2025
e-ISSN: xxxx-xxxx
Website: https://jurnal.umk.ac.id/index.php/teylin

TPR for a Toddler in Learning Simple English Instruction: A Case Study

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching simple English instructions to a 3-year-old toddler in a multilingual environment. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research involved five consecutive sessions where the subject was exposed to instructions such as "Stand up!", "Sit down!", "Look!", "Listen!", and "Be quiet!" The sessions included pretests to assess baseline comprehension, TPR treatments using verbal commands paired with physical actions, and post-tests to evaluate progress. The findings revealed that the subject demonstrated significant improvements in comprehension, engagement, and the ability to perform and verbalize the instructions. While initial reliance on visual aids like flashcards was necessary, repeated exposure through interactive and playful drills enabled the subject to transition to independent comprehension. By the final session, the subject was able to follow, articulate, and spontaneously use the instructions in casual contexts, indicating functional language acquisition. This study highlights TPR's potential as an effective and engaging method for early language instruction. The integration of physical movement, verbal commands, and interactive activities fosters comprehension and retention while promoting positive engagement. The results support TPR as a practical approach for introducing foreign languages to young children, particularly in multilingual settings. Future research could explore its application in larger groups and varied linguistic contexts to further validate its effectiveness.

Key words: TPR, physical action, instruction

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition in early childhood is a dynamic process shaped by natural curiosity, environmental exposure, and effective teaching methods. Total Physical Response (TPR), a method developed by James Asher, has gained recognition for its ability to combine language learning with physical actions, aligning with young learners' innate tendencies to learn through movement and play. Asher (1969) highlighted TPR's potential to simplify the acquisition of verbal instructions by connecting language to physical actions, making it particularly suitable for young children who rely heavily on nonverbal cues.

Recent studies have reinforced TPR's effectiveness in early language acquisition. Prima (2024) emphasizes that TPR engages multiple learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—facilitating vocabulary recognition in early childhood. The study found that TPR significantly improved vocabulary recognition and comprehension in children aged 5 to 7. However, Prima's research primarily focused on structured classroom environments and did not address the adaptability of TPR to informal or home-based learning settings, which are common for toddlers under 4 years old. Moreover, the study did not explore the impact of TPR on language production, limiting its scope to receptive language skills.

Similarly, Paramita (2022) found that TPR significantly increases learners' motivation and participation in vocabulary learning, showcasing its ability to make language acquisition engaging and effective. While the study provided valuable insights into the motivational benefits of TPR, its participant group consisted of children aged 6 to 9, who are developmentally different from toddlers. This raises questions about the applicability of TPR

to younger learners with shorter attention spans and different cognitive processing capabilities. Additionally, the study focused on vocabulary acquisition and did not examine whether TPR could be effectively used to teach functional language skills, such as following multi-step instructions.

Nevertheless, these findings resonate with the observations of educators such as Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2004), who advocate for integrating TPR into early language teaching to reduce anxiety and foster active engagement. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the importance of social interaction and scaffolding in language learning, which is integral to the TPR method as it involves direct interaction and demonstration by an instructor.

Building on these insights, this study explores how TPR can facilitate learning simple English instructions in a 3-year-old toddler. The subject, exposed primarily to Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese, has shown an intriguing ability to understand and respond to certain English commands, such as "jump!" and "no running!" This phenomenon, observed during interactions with the researcher, suggests that kinesthetic cues may play a role in her language learning.

This research seeks to answer the question: "How does a 3-year-old toddler respond to the use of TPR in learning simple English instructions?" By employing a qualitative case study approach and structured observation, the study examines the child's responses to TPR-based activities. The findings aim to contribute to the growing understanding of TPR's role in early language education and its potential to support multilingual development in young children.

By integrating foundational theories and recent research, this study underscores the relevance of TPR as a practical and effective method for fostering language acquisition during the critical early years of development.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching simple English instructions to a 3-year-old child. A case study design is particularly suitable for research that seeks to explore a phenomenon in its real-life context, as noted by Yin (2018), making it ideal for investigating the child's interactions with TPR-based activities. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the subject's responses, providing rich, contextual insights into her language acquisition process.

The subject is a 3-year-old girl whose primary languages are Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese. Despite limited formal exposure to English, she has demonstrated an ability to comprehend basic English commands. Such linguistic ability, combined with her exposure to multiple languages, positions her as an ideal candidate for exploring TPR's impact on early language learning, particularly in a multilingual environment.

Given that the subject of this research is a single 3-year-old child, detailed observations focused on three key aspects:

1. Comprehension: This includes the subject's ability to understand verbal instructions and perform corresponding actions accurately.
2. Engagement: Observed through attention levels, willingness to participate in activities, and visible enjoyment (e.g., smiling, mimicking actions).

3. Physical and verbal responses: Assessed based on verbal responses, including attempts to repeat the instructions, and physical responses, such as immediate execution of actions.

Data were gathered through structured observations over five consecutive days, with each session comprising three phases: a pretest to assess the subject's initial response to instructions, a TPR treatment where commands were taught through verbal and physical actions, and a post-test to evaluate learning outcomes. Structured observation is recognized as a robust qualitative data collection method, particularly for studies involving young children, as it captures real-time behavior in a natural setting (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The primary instrument used was an observation sheet designed to systematically record the subject's performance across key dimensions, such as comprehension, engagement, and responsiveness.

Qualitative data were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns and trends in the subject's learning process. Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the examination of observational data, enabling the identification of recurring themes related to the child's comprehension and engagement. Comparisons between pretest and post-test results were made to evaluate the effectiveness of TPR, while spontaneous usage of the learned instructions outside the structured sessions was noted as an indicator of practical language acquisition. Such an approach is consistent with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) framework for qualitative data analysis, which emphasizes the importance of identifying patterns and drawing conclusions based on iterative data review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching simple English instructions to a 3-year-old toddler. Over five consecutive sessions, the subject demonstrated a significant progression in understanding, performing, and verbalizing the targeted instructions. The integration of verbal commands, physical actions, and structured activities highlights TPR's efficacy in early language acquisition.

Activities and Objectives

The structured activities designed for each session were instrumental in achieving the study's objectives:

1. Pretest: Assessing the subject's baseline ability to understand and respond to the instructions without prior demonstration.
2. TPR Treatment: Pairing verbal commands with physical actions, including drills such as:
    a. Look and Follow: Demonstrating actions and having the subject imitate them.
    b. Listen and Do: Varying the speed of instructions to test comprehension.
    c. Look and Say: Encouraging verbalization while performing the actions.
    d. Interactive Whisper and Do: Adding a playful element by whispering commands to maintain engagement.
3. Post-test: Evaluating the subject's performance after the TPR treatment, with a focus on accuracy and independence.

Each session built upon the previous one, gradually introducing more complex tasks to ensure steady progress. The activities were tailored to the subject's developmental stage, ensuring they were age-appropriate and engaging (Reilly & Ward, 1997; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990).

Subject's Response to TPR

The subject's response to the TPR method was observed across comprehension, verbal and physical responses, and engagement levels. Over five sessions, the findings revealed a clear progression from reliance on external aids, such as prompts or demonstrations, to independent comprehension and spontaneous application of instructions. Physical actions initially required frequent guidance, but as the sessions progressed, the subject began to consistently comprehend the instructions and execute actions such as "sit down" or "stand up" without prompts. Verbal responses, though minimal at first, gradually included attempts to repeat or echo the instructions, reflecting increased familiarity and engagement. Engagement levels also evolved from passive observation to active participation, as the subject showed increased enthusiasm and quicker responses, indicating growing confidence and understanding of the TPR tasks.

Comprehension and Response

The subject's ability to comprehend and respond to the instructions evolved progressively throughout the study:

1. Session 1: The primary objective was to familiarize the subject with the instructions "Stand up!", "Sit down!", "Look!", "Listen!", and "Be quiet!" During this session, the subject initially showed no understanding of the commands during the pretest. Flashcards were introduced to aid visualization, and the researcher demonstrated physical actions corresponding to each instruction. After TPR-based drills, the subject could perform the actions during the post-test. However, no spontaneous responses were observed at this stage.
2. Session 2: This session focused on reinforcing familiarity and enabling the subject to identify the instructions and perform the corresponding actions. Flashcards were used during the review phase to refresh her memory. By the end of the session, the subject consistently performed the actions in response to the instructions during the post-test, though spontaneous responses remained absent.
3. Session 3: With the objective of enabling the subject to identify actions and begin verbalizing the instructions, flashcards were no longer used. The subject responded to some instructions (e.g., "Sit down!" and "Be quiet!") without visual aids and began verbalizing the commands, albeit with pronunciation errors. This marked the transition from reliance on external aids to internalized comprehension.
4. Session 4: The subject progressed to performing actions while verbalizing the instructions simultaneously. By the end of the session, spontaneous responses to "Stand up!" and "Sit down!" were observed during casual, unstructured interactions, indicating significant internalization.
5. Session 5: The final session aimed to enable the subject to both give and follow the instructions independently. The subject successfully performed all actions and articulated the instructions during structured and casual settings. For example, when asked to "Listen!" in a random context, the subject responded appropriately without visual or physical prompts, demonstrating full comprehension and practical application.

The progression of the subject's comprehension highlights the sequential nature of language acquisition facilitated by TPR:

1. Initial Stages (Sessions 1 and 2): During the first two sessions, the subject's responses to the instructions "Stand up!", "Sit down!", "Look!", "Listen!", and "Be quiet!" were minimal during the pretest phases. She required multiple repetitions and physical demonstrations to perform the associated actions. Flashcards served as a crucial visual aid, helping her connect the verbal commands with their physical meanings. However, no spontaneous responses were observed during this phase, suggesting that her understanding was still in the initial stages of development.
2. Midpoint Progress (Session 3): By the third session, the subject began to show marked improvement in comprehension, especially for the instructions "Sit down!" and "Be quiet!". She was able to respond to these instructions during the review phase, even without visual aids. This shift indicates that the physical and verbal repetitions were becoming internalized (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ellis, 2015). Her attempts to verbalize the instructions further demonstrated growing confidence in language use, although some pronunciation errors persisted.
3. Mastery Phase (Sessions 4 and 5): In the final two sessions, the subject achieved full comprehension of all five instructions. She could accurately perform the actions and verbally articulate the instructions during structured activities and casual, unstructured settings. For example, when asked to "Stand up!" or "Sit down!" outside of the sessions, she performed the actions independently without visual or physical prompts. This level of spontaneous application supports evidence of the critical period hypothesis for language acquisition (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978).

Engagement Levels

Engagement played a crucial role in the subject's progress, as evidenced by her increasing scores across attention, willingness to participate, and enjoyment levels:

1. During the early sessions, attention scores were moderate (3), reflecting the typical short attention span of toddlers. While occasional prompting was needed, the subject showed interest in the activities, particularly those involving physical movement (Reilly & Ward, 1997).
2. By Session 3, willingness to participate and enjoyment levels rose to high (scores of 4), as the subject exhibited visible signs of enthusiasm, such as smiling and mimicking actions.
3. In the final sessions, the subject consistently scored the highest (5) in all engagement metrics, demonstrating full focus, eagerness to participate, and sustained enjoyment. These improvements highlight the interactive and playful nature of TPR as an engaging teaching method (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990).

Physical and Verbal Responses

The subject's responses reflected a clear progression from reliance on external aids to independent comprehension:

1. Physical Responses: Initially requiring repeated demonstrations, the subject was able to perform all actions independently by the fourth session.
2. Verbal Responses: The subject's ability to articulate instructions improved significantly, transitioning from inconsistent attempts to accurate repetitions. By the final session, she could give and follow all instructions confidently.

Key Findings

1. TPR's Effectiveness: The results align with research by Prima (2024) and Paramita (2022), confirming that TPR's combination of physical movement and verbal commands enhances comprehension and retention in young learners.
2. Importance of Repetition and Play: Repeated exposure through structured drills, combined with playful elements, helped the subject internalize the instructions and reduced reliance on visual aids (Ellis, 2015).
3. Spontaneous Application: The subject's ability to respond accurately in unstructured settings underscores TPR's role in promoting functional language acquisition, not merely rote learning (Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978).

This study highlights the potential of TPR as a practical and engaging method for early childhood language instruction. The method's interactive and multimodal nature fosters both comprehension and enjoyment, making it particularly effective for young learners in multilingual contexts. Future research could expand on these findings by applying TPR to larger cohorts or comparing its effectiveness with alternative methods.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the effectiveness of the Total Physical Response (TPR) method in teaching simple English instructions to a 3-year-old toddler, with results showing notable improvements in comprehension, engagement, and the ability to perform and verbalize commands over five sessions. By combining verbal commands with physical actions, TPR enhanced the subject's ability to internalize and retain language, transitioning from initial reliance on visual aids to independent comprehension and spontaneous responses. Repetition and interactive activities proved crucial in maintaining the subject's focus and fostering mastery of the targeted instructions in both structured and unstructured contexts. The study emphasizes TPR's value as a multimodal learning tool, integrating physical, visual, and verbal elements to support young learners, while also highlighting the importance of engagement and active participation in sustaining enthusiasm for learning. Though limited to a single subject, these findings suggest that TPR is not only effective for early language acquisition but also provides a positive, age-appropriate approach that could be applied in multilingual and early childhood education settings.

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